

Nassau Hall
Princeton, Mercer County, New Jersey

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PHOTOGRAPHS
WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA
District of New Jersey

Historic American Buildings Survey
Seymour Williams, A.I.A., District Officer
133 Central Avenue, Rahway, New Jersey

Nassau Hall
Princeton, Mercer County, New Jersey

Owner: Princeton University

Date of Erection: 1754-1756

Architect: Dr. William Shippen, a trustee, and
Robert Smith, the architect of Independence Hall

Builder: Robert Smith

Present Condition: Excellent; restored after the
fire in 1855

Number of Stories: Three and tower

Materials of Construction: Foundation - stone

Exterior walls - cut brown
stone; window sills stone;
cornice new, made of copper

Interior walls - plaster,
except the Faculty Room
which has walnut paneling;
the stair turrets were
added in 1855

Inside brick chimneys

Roof - pitch with large
skylight on left wing

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Historical Data:

Nassau Hall, known as "North College" and "Old North", was erected in 1754-1756 on land given by Mr. Nathaniel Fitz Randolph. It was named Nassau Hall in honor of William of Nassau, Prince of Orange, William III of England, in 1756 at the suggestion of Governor Belcher.

The building was planned originally to house the college refectory, recitation rooms, chapel library, and students' apartments. The only known contemporary ground plan of the building was sketched by the Rev. Ezra Stiles of Yale in his diary for 1754. Ground was broken on July 29, 1754; the corner-stone was laid September 17, 1754. The first college exercise was a sermon in the prayer-hall in 1756.

Military occupation during the Revolution completely ruined the interior of Nassau Hall and restoration was not completed for several years afterwards. The building was occupied as a barrack and hospital by American and British Troops in turn. The college evacuated the building in the year 1777, and it was held as a British Post until the Battle of Princeton in 1777 when it was recaptured by Washington. It was abandoned later in the same day and occupied for a few hours by Cornwallis, who was succeeded by American Troops who remained almost to the end of the war.

The first State Legislature of New Jersey met in Nassau Hall in 1776. In the college library room over the main entrance Continental Congress sat during the summer and autumn of 1783 in ordinary sessions, adjourning to the prayer-hall on special occasions. Here in August of 1783, Continental Congress received General Washington in a public audience and tendered to him the thanks of the nation. Later in the same

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summer Congress received Peter Van Berckel, Minister Plenipotentiary from the Netherlands, the first foreign minister credited the United States after independence had been acknowledged.

With the exception of the President's house, now the Dean's house (NJ-88), and certain independent out buildings, it was until the beginning of the nineteenth century the only building on the campus. It was here that the early students of Princeton, with the exception of a very few, were housed - Madison, Paterson, Burr, Frenau, Rush, "Light Horse Harry" Lee, and others. In 1762 a new kitchen building was erected on the outside at the east end; the students, however, were still allowed a fire in the old kitchen to make their tea in the afternoon.

The interior was destroyed by fire in 1802 and 1855, but each time the walls remained. Until the restoration after the fire in 1855 there were three entrances, one on each side of the central entrance with corresponding exits in the rear. The turrets at the ends of the building, as well as the high cupola, date from the restoration of 1855.

Before 1855 the corridors ran through the entire length of the building. The interior of the east end has been greatly altered to provide at first for a museum and lately for the offices of that administration, but the west end preserves its original arrangement and appearance.

The prayer-hall, now the faculty room, is historic. It had originally a gallery and platform surmounted by a high pulpit. Here daybreak and vesper chapel services were held at which attendance was compulsory. George Whitefield the famous eighteenth century evangelist once preached in this hall at 5 o'clock in the morning. The funeral services of the

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Presidents Aaron Burr, Samuel Davies, Jonathan Edwards, and John Witherspoon and of Richard Stockton and Colonel Aaron Burr, former vice-presidents of the United States, took place in this room.

There are many important portraits in the Faculty Room, chiefly those of the presidents and early trustees and benefactors of the University. The most interesting picture is that of General Washington by Charles Wilson Peale. The sittings for this picture were given while Washington was at Rocky Hill in 1783. It was painted by order of the Board of Trustees and paid for by money which Washington had presented to the college. The frame of the picture originally held a portrait of George II which was shot away when Alexander Hamilton's battery fired at the building.

On one side of the doorway of Nassau Hall is a bronze tablet setting forth the stages in the development of the university. On the other is a tablet erected by the New Jersey Chapter of the Sons of the American Revolution epitomizing the history of Nassau Hall. The entrance hall has been remodeled as a memorial to Princetonians who have died in war. On the east wall are the names of those who fell in the War of Revolution, War of 1812, and the Spanish and Mexican Wars. The names on the west wall are of those who fell in the war between the states; they are almost equally divided between the North and the South. The names of the one hundred and fifty-one killed in the World War are on the panel facing the entrance. Memorial Hall was designed by Messrs. Dey and Carter. It was dedicated on Alumni Day, February 1, 1920 which day has been chosen as Princeton Memorial Day.

Many college activities took place in front of Old Nassau. Here in the summer of 1770 the students burned the letter of the New York Merchants breaking the Non-Importation Agreement; here also in January, 1774,

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a few days after Paul Revere brought news of the Boston Tea Party, the students made a bonfire of the entire college supply of tea with an effigy of the unpopular Governor Hutchinson of Massachusetts, with a canister of tea about his neck, in the center of the fire. On July 9, 1776, the Declaration of Independence was read there, salutes fired, and the entire building illuminated. The surrender of Cornwallis at Yorktown in 1781 and the announcement of hostilities in April, 1783 were celebrated on this spot. Many other celebrations have taken place here from the time of the Revolution until the World War days. On the campus in front of Nassau, senior singing is held each year. Tablets set in the walls of Nassau Hall mark the ivy planted at commencement by the graduating classes.

Nassau Hall is now used entirely for administrative purposes and contains the offices of the President, Secretary, Registrar, the Deans, Director of Admission, the Graduate Council, the Bureau of Personnel, Director of Public Relations, and the offices of the Graduate School.

Bibliography:

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Field Book and Drawings of Survey

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Rev. Jan. 25, '37 THW